

The Ohio State University

a brief inquiry as to why women don't go to the bathroom alone

Distinction Thesis for a BFA in Dance

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Background

“a brief inquiry as to why women don’t go to the bathroom alone” is a multidisciplinary performance piece centered around perceptions of the female performing body. The work is made possible by five dancers seamlessly shifting between different performance disciplines such as dance, theatre, drag, burlesque, stand-up comedy, and so much more. This work encompasses both my knowledge and ingenuity in dance as well as my passion for feminist studies. “a brief inquiry” exists at the unique and delicate cross-section of academia, creative inquiries, political commentaries, shared and differing histories, and a comedic look at the world. Through narrative structures and laughter, the work humorously tackles difficult conversations surrounding gender and the role of female performing bodies within a patriarchal world.

Description of the Research

There are many things that brought me to this project. While I understand that it is not an amalgamation of my entire academic and artistic career thus far, this project encompasses many of the things I have learned and grown to be passionate about in my four years at The Ohio State University. The work also touches upon interests and points of view in my life that stretch beyond my collegiate career. In both my personal and artistic life, which I often view to be synonymous, I understand situations and the world around me through a comical and lighthearted point of view. While this not my way of disregarding the severity and seriousness of certain aspects of the world, it is my understanding that humor is my personal mode of accessibility and understanding. I have found this mindset seeping into my choreographic work over the course of my artistic and academic careers in the Department of Dance and beyond. Furthermore, my studies in the Department of Women’s Gender & Sexuality Studies have ignited my feminist inquiries and have undoubtedly touched upon my personal, academic, and

artistic pursuits. Lastly, my studies in my Arts Management major have given me the skills, tools, and motivation to want to create, direct, and produce a work entirely of my own. All of these interests and studies brought me to my project with the knowledge that I wanted to create a piece that circulated around themes of feminism, functioned under a humorous tone, and was created and choreographed by myself.

With an established idea of what I wanted to create, I then looked to various methods of research to both inform, support, and guide my project. My research for this project has taken root in multiple different modes which I can break down into comedic research, performance research, feminist research, and choreographic research. My comedic research started by first addressing my own comedic biases and what I personally find funny. Though it changes situationally, I generally find humor in a performance genre within the implementation of concepts such as absurdity, vulgarity, excess, ridiculousness, and exhaustion. I was able to make those as markers for myself as themes and elements of humor I wanted to include within the piece. I continued my comedic research by watching stand-up comedy. Stand-up comedy is the most basic application of live performance and humor. I watched stand-up comedy bits and specials by several different comedians, centering my focus around female comedians. I watched videos from modern comedians such as Dolcé Sloan, Rosebud Baker, Megan Gailey and many more. Not only did I want to see how they tackled comedy in their own performances as females within a male-dominated field, but I wanted to see what topics they were tackling. Almost all of the female comedians I watched centered their female expression at the heart of their comedy, whether it be directly or indirectly. I did not view it in a way such that their gender pigeonholed them into only discussing their femininity, but rather I viewed it as a reclamation of their power in this field that has often placed a misogynistic view of femininity at the heart of its humor. I

knew this was the sense of power I wanted to portray in my piece as a way of owning and celebrating the fact that women can be and are funny. This goal was further fueled by my watching of journalist Christopher Hitchens 2008 interview with *Vanity Fair* where he controversially argues that women inherently cannot be funny all the while diminishing women's power down to only their looks and their sexual prowess through blatantly sexist and ill-informed comments.

Another area of comedic research I dove into was the realm of dance-comedy. My first exposure to the genre was at the Bates Dance Festival in the summer of 2018 where I was able to watch and work with dance-comedy artists Claire Porter and Sara Juli. I reconnected to their work in my research by viewing and analyzing Claire Porter's "Breaking News" performed at the danceNOW[nyc] Festival in 2009, Sara Juli's 2017 TEDx Talk entitled "Shadow Artist," and their joint piece "The Lectern: rule by rule by rule" performed in 2017. While I know countless other examples exist both within and beyond the concert dance world, these were accessible and tangible examples for myself to see comedy in practice within a concert dance setting. From their works I was able to observe how they are able to implement humor into their chosen performance practice without compromising the legitimacy, importance, and ingenuity of their choreographed movement.

The last area where I conducted my comedic research came from the History of Performance course I took through The Ohio State University Department of Theatre. This course covered the history of theatrical performance through plays from both the European and Asian continents. Part of this course was dedicated to diving deep into classic Greek comedies. I was able to gain knowledge on the basic historical functions of comedy within a western performance space. I specifically became attached to Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* and how explicitly

sexual it is in nature and how it portrays female characters with sexual agency and powerful autonomy over their own bodies, even if they were originally played by male actors.

This led me into another area of my research which involved an interest in different modes of performance practices. My knowledge about dance has obviously been reinforced by my academic career as well as by the dance comedy research discussed earlier in this paper. Another method of performance research I did was again supplemented by my History of Performance course. Through the in-depth analysis of classic theatrical texts, I was able to understand the natural conventions of theatre. Such conventions include the importance of a story arc, how and why characters enter a space, the natural flow of speaking, and much more. In studying stand-up comics, I was able to gather an understanding of the power of voice, projection, and inflection on the effectiveness of the humor on the audience. It also gave me insight on the methods of comedic improvisation such that a comedians set is never the exact same each time they perform it. This creates a freshness for the performer whose enthusiasm is then much more positively received, through laughs and reactions, by the audience.

Another area of performance I researched was burlesque. I knew that elements of burlesque were something I wanted to include in this project thinking back on when I choreographed a solo for The Ohio State University Department of Dance Spring Concert 2019 entitled “duet”. In the piece I seductively and longingly dragged my body across a ballet barre drawing up questions about the place of female dancing bodies in different methods of movement and performance. In my research about burlesque, I came across an article entitled “Unruly Women” that discussed the unruliness of female burlesque dancers from a historical context. The author argues,

The nature of burlesque as a sexualized performance art caters to the voyeuristic gaze of a male audience, but the performer is not necessarily at the mercy of that gaze. Women performers can be seen as objects on the stage, placed just so, so as to make the consumption of their image most pleasing. Or they can be seen as having agency and subjectivity, depending on how ‘unruly’ they are being (Leonard-Rose, chapter 3).

This quote helped me reinforce my desire to prove the female agency and sexual ownership of my performers on the stage through the means and methods of burlesque performance.

The last type of performance practice I researched was that of drag performance. Paying respect to its roots in the LGBTQ community, I dove into research about drag performance because of how it employs many of the aspects of humor I find to be funny such as excess and campiness. In the anthology *Contemporary Drag Practices and Performers: Drag in a Changing Scene Volume 1*, the foundation of many drag practices is outlined. The editors state, “As a performance form, it does not primarily show gender as a construct; rather it highlights the power of parody in tackling binary” (Edward and Farrier 10). This is something that solidifies the foundation of what drag performance is really about in a very non-descript way. In essence, drag is not simply about defying a gender binary, but rather it concerns multiple conversations at the same time. Such conversations include, race, class, age, the very importance of performance, and so many more. Another part of my research with drag performance involved attending drag events. Though I had attended casually in the past, on October 24, 2019 I attended a night of drag queen performances at Union Café in Columbus, OH in order to gain hands-on knowledge of these performance elements I could respectfully utilize within my own choreographic work. Some of the elements that I noticed and then utilized were energy levels, audience interactions, costuming, and relationship to music.

My feminist research for this project was supplemented by my coursework in the Department of Women's Gender & Sexuality studies. The feminist research I did was not necessarily separate from the rest of the research I was doing; rather, it was the underlying theme that supplemented, supported, and guided the rest of my work. In all areas of my research, I centered my focus around a feminist framework of thought because that was going to be what the piece essentially circulated around with the use of five female performers. Furthermore, in my rehearsal process, I made it a goal to consensually include the opinions and life experiences of my female performers and collaborators in order to make sure the choreographed work did not monolithically express only my ideas, experiences, and feminist point of view. Lastly, I made sure that I conducted my research and constructed my rehearsal space from an intersectional point of view. I made sure I recognized that it is impossible to only consider one aspect of identity at a time. While my work was focused around gender, femininity, and performance, it did not mean that other conversations about identity were not welcomed or were not also being addressed in the space as a part of the overall process.

My final area of research included my choreographic research. This project did not involve a specified timeline that consisted of a period of academic research then followed by a period of creation. Both of these processes were intertwined and worked in conjunction with one another. My research outside of the studio reinforced my choreographic process and vice versa. My choreographic process was a way for me to actively implement ideas and theories and create a successful space for community, comfortability, and contribution to thrive. In this process I put the multiple methods of performance into practice. The implementation of these practices, through the help of collaboration, allowed for them to be set within the work and for the deeper

thematic material to begin to flourish. The process of choreographing also taught me how to actively apply and effectively set humor into practice.

Critical Analysis of the Work

The stage was set with multiple props and set pieces. The audience sat arranged intimately on all four sides of the stage. The rectangular stage was set in different sections. In one corner there was a ballet barre placed at an angle. Another corner contained six chairs arranged over a fluffy pink carpet. The third corner had two delicately placed pink high-heeled shoes. The last quadrant remained blank along with the center section of the stage. The props and set were utilized for various reasons. The stage setting and the use of props helped me to draw upon elements of many different performance genres, especially that of theatre. The setting, adorned in dashes of pink, implied to the audience before the piece even began that the work was to be playful and lived outside the traditional concert dance barometers. The stage setting also allowed for a very clear and functional visual difference between the different sections of the stage that would be reinforced by the vignette-like nature of the work.

The piece began as one performer entered the space and stood center stage. She took a binder out of her tote bag and proceeded to pull out a paper and recite various tongue twisters. The performer, Lauren Garrett, was essentially used to break the ice with the audience and to set her as a focal point within the piece. She was costumed in a vibrant pink unitard, a pink sweater, a very high ponytail, and a pair of character shoes. To many, she looked as though she was a dancer or performer of some sort getting ready for a big audition. Lauren's storyline continued, amidst the showcasing of the other various vignettes occurring on the stage, as the audience saw her journey through a dramatized cycle of a performer's struggle, all of which culminated in her big audition. All of Lauren's comedic elements which included her costuming, spoken lines,

embarrassing falls, audience interactions, and intentionally horrible audition were used for more than just laughs. Lauren's struggles were very representative of several different themes. She represented the cyclical struggle of *performing* a perceived vision of femininity for the consumption of others. She created a through-line for the audience to follow as the piece flowed in and out of various vignettes. Her journey, though ridiculously expressed at times, made the audience actually want to see her succeed. Though her audition was bad, the audience felt sympathy for her when the piece closed on Lauren not getting the job and having to repeat her cycle of struggle all over again.

The next vignette that was seen on stage after Lauren's introduction, was a duet performed by Aya Venet and Sarah Bodony. The section began as Sarah entered the stage, dressed like a man, and carrying with her a box of clothing. She dumped the clothing on the ground and arranged the articles around the space. She moved mimetically as she waited impatiently for Aya to enter the stage. Aya hurriedly and apologetically ran into the scene and immediately began to layer on the clothing from the pile. She did so while attempting to dance around Sarah graciously in the space. The piece was accompanied by sound from an old 1950s stocking commercial. The music made it feel as though the audience was watching an old film that seemingly portrayed a strong male and beautiful woman willing to do whatever for his own enjoyment. This section, though not as literal in storyline as Lauren's, was representative of themes of excess and the desire of wanting to please the male-gaze. The movement made it known that Sarah, as the representative male figure in the quadrant of the stage, defined the spaces where Aya was able to move and be agent in. The clothing that Aya also layered on began to inhibit her movement and her body as the vignette continued. Though it was funny to see a

person outrageously and feverishly layer clothing on their body, it sadly showed the reality of the oppressive history regarding female beauty standards.

The third defined section of the piece was a solo performed by Sara Wagenmaker. This section created very similar ties to the duet section both thematically as well as through the fact that this section was accompanied by the sound of a vintage 1950s makeup tutorial. Sara entered the stage and after meticulously laying out a basket of makeup products began to mimic her meticulousness through choreographed movement. From there, she proceeded to layer multiple lipsticks across her face, to her own frustration and disappointment in herself. She ultimately got so frustrated that she began to leave the stage. The next time the audience saw her was when she reentered the center of her quadrant and erased her meticulous work by stripping away and glopping on a thick mask of cold cream. While it was easy to find humor in Sara's discomfort and frustration on stage, a deeper look reveals the underlying problem of impossibility for the fruition of femininity even in women's own eyes. The accompanying sound also aided in addressing impossible beauty standards that have permeated femininity throughout history. The vintage makeup tutorial, narrated by a man, pointed out meticulous rights and wrongs for female beauty. Sara's frustration, in a way, made it as though the sound was running a loop in her own head, permeating her mind and clouding her own judgement on what it truly means to feel beautiful.

The last defined section was a restaging and reformation of my piece entitled "duet," performed this time by Raychel Valentin. Raychel entered and approached the ballet barre with a flirtatious sense of giddiness, dressed entirely in pink ballet attire. Typical ballet music played as Raychel stereotypically and enthusiastically portrayed the picture-perfect image of a ballerina. When the audience returned to her storyline, Raychel's movement flipped a switch. Burlesque

music began to play as Raychel seductively let down her hair and danced sexually across the ballet barre. Still dressed in her ballet attire, Raychel depicted a dramatized burlesque scene all the while winking and waving at audience members. This section has a lot of deeper meanings. The surface level humor showed a funny switch and juxtaposition between the innocence of ballet and the raunchiness of burlesque. However, the section questioned the notion of what it means to be a female dancing body performing for the consumption of the male gaze, whether it be through ballet or burlesque. It also questioned the history of ballet, seemingly filled with rigidity and strict gender roles, by having the dancer defy the sanctity of the ballet barre and treating it almost as a stripper pole. It also brought to the forefront the question of how genres of performance have hierarchically been ranked throughout history.

Other major components that went into the performance and construction of this piece included the costuming, arrangement, and lighting. The entirety of the costuming and props were in different shades of pink, down to the smallest of items like hair clips and ribbons. Not only did this question normative ties between femininity and the color pink by taking ownership of it, but it also created unity within a piece that displayed multiple different stories. Costuming also was a very accessible and readable means for constructing humor and playfulness in the piece. The construction of the order and stage placement of the piece also played an incredibly important role. The sections, with help of the lighting and the stage spacing, flowed in and out of one another without sticking to the normal guidelines of story arc. The dancers all remained on stage together in the performative sphere that I created for them. The choice to showcase multiple different stories and themes was to present a multiplicity to femininity and performance. The choice to create different sections that didn't interact with one another, but rather shared the

space and displayed similar overarching themes, was to give respect and recognition to each section, but still root them in the communal reality of the world they all were in.

This piece actively used humor and theatrics as a means to connect with the audience. It connected with the audience through humor while presenting problems and social deconstructions at the same time. It took agency and ownership in a performance space to address those problems and social deconstructions. Furthermore, this project is proof of the validity of the power of artistic mediums in creating conversations and making change in the world.

Summary of the Results

a brief inquiry as to why women don't go to the bathroom alone is a project with multiple layers that analyze and signify what the work is about and what it has accomplished. Part of the research that went into the project involved addressing multiplicity and capitalizing on it. This created a piece that functioned under multiple definitions and therefore attracted praise and attention from a wide audienceship. This marriage of different performance genres, harsh societal topics, and the overarching presence of humor created a piece that was not only accessible but also effective.

This piece was so accessible because of the utilization of humor. Laughter is a communal human experience and creating a work that capitalizes on that is a work that creates a community of people in the performance space. Humor is what allows many of us as humans to address the harshness of the world around us with hope and brightness.

This piece was so effective because the accessible use of humor allowed greater room for difficult conversations. The stark conversations about gender and the role of women in performance and society would not have been so easily accepted and addressed by the audience

if it were not for the application of humor. I had multiple people approach me after the performances and say how funny the piece was, but then how they reflected on themselves and questioned why they found many of the things to be funny in the first place. At a surface level, it is funny to see a woman smear lipstick across her face in frustration, but it is also not funny to see a woman grappling with the impossible beauty standards for women in the world. The results and the significance of this work stretch far beyond this performance itself. The answers don't come in easy numbers and values, rather in the fact that it has sparked conversations to make change in the world when it comes to gender inequality.

Implication for Future Goals

For me, the results of this project are much more than a choreographed piece and an analytical paper. This project gave an incredible community of people and supporters. This project gave me the means and space to work with my fellow peers and artists that I know I will continue to try to work with for the rest of my artistic career. It also gave me gratitude for my education, my advisors, professors, and more who have instilled in me a validity for belief in myself.

This project also taught me a lot. This Project has taught me that I have the power and means to create large-scale choreographic work and research as I head beyond my academic career. It also taught me that no project of this depth needs to be handled alone. The collaborators and supporters in my life have taught me they are an active part of my processes and that I should not feel guilty for utilizing them. This project taught me about patience within the choreographic process. This project taught me about time management and how to work with and around other artists. This project taught me about how to deal with artistic frustration and

figuring out how to get the ideas in my head across to other people. This project has taught me about sticking to my morals and gut feelings.

I would not want to have culminated my four years at The Ohio State University in any other way. I am leaving feeling fulfilled that I have created a work that not only reflects my artistic and academic voices but talks more largely about the changes that I want to see be made in the world. I am leaving proud and with a little bit of laughter and optimism for my future as an artist and a person.

Performance Recording: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RX2BeXuzA_0

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